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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and full employment and decent work for all

Promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all

Report of the expert group meeting

1. The expert group meeting on promoting empowerment of people in achieving poverty eradication, social integration and decent work for all was convened from 10 to 12 September 2012 to assist in drafting the report of the Secretary-General on the priority theme of the fifty-first session of the Commission for Social Development. Key issues that emerged from the meeting are set out below, along with agreed recommendations presented to the Commission on the elaboration of new policy approaches linking its current work to the social pillar of sustainable development and the formulation of the post-2015 global development goals and objectives.

Key issues

2. Empowerment is best served by an enabling environment that enshrines human rights, expands choices and enables empowered participation in decision-making. At the United Nations, empowerment has referred mainly to the promotion of the rights of specific social groups, in particular marginalized and disadvantaged groups, including women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, young people and older persons. A new vision of promoting people's empowerment embraces a holistic view so as to focus on people-centred development as a comprehensive objective of the Organization's development agenda. The Commission's work on empowerment may strengthen the social pillar of sustainable development by tackling common challenges relating to climate change and taking appropriate actions at all levels.

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3. Empowered social groups and individuals are more likely to succeed in solving major challenges such as those relating to poverty, social exclusion and lack of decent work, in addition to threats to sustainable development. Empowerment is a process requiring an enabling environment that supports policies and attitudinal change to permit all people of all abilities, across the life cycle, to participate in decision-making that affects their lives. The enabling environment consists of a formal institutional structure permitting and encouraging meaningful participation; the creation and fostering of space and meaning for individuals and groups to participate; and access to knowledge and information.

4. The most measurable part of empowerment is participation. There is a learning interaction between participation and enabling factors. Participation can affect the enabling environment, just as the enabling environment promotes participation. An emerging way to look at participation is in terms of citizenship. Citizenship means having rights and responsibilities, but mostly being able to participate. More work is needed to develop cost-effective indicators to measure the extent of empowerment.

5. The first step in promoting empowerment is to ensure an enabling environment. This involves having rights, the policies and practical arrangements to enjoy them, a favourable institutional environment and attitudes and behaviour that make participation effective. Appropriate policies and institutions need to be in place. Good, responsive and transparent government institutions are critical for empowerment. Policies that encourage organized participation are also important. A sense of personal empowerment, or political efficacy, is further essential. Education systems can help to create concepts of critical thinking and information processing through their curricula. Moreover, the increase in information availability through new information and communications technology has made participation easier.

6. Participation has to be seen in terms of individuals, but also of groups, given that group characteristics help to define issues relating to empowerment. Empowerment of women was defined by the participants in terms of gender relations. The process of empowerment, which began with rights but also included programmes and policies was to ensure that there was equality between women and men in key areas of life.

7. A key factor in the enabling environment is the removal of cultural and physical barriers so that persons with disabilities can enjoy equal access to all opportunities available to others. To empower young people, policies should be put in place that enable them to participate in decision-making to address their problems. For older persons, the core issues relating to empowerment may be described as strengthening capabilities, expanding choices and ensuring human rights. Empowerment is viewed through the process of socialization, implying intergenerational interactions as a source of mutual support, essentially for younger persons. Civil society organizations have been effective in bringing about far-reaching changes that allow self-empowerment and encouraging the adoption of norms and standards.

8. Poverty is caused by a lack of economic opportunities resulting from diverse factors, some natural, some human-caused. While poverty disempowers people, increasing participation can make anti-poverty policies work more effectively. The participants also examined empowerment in the light of the concept of "shared society" devised by the Club de Madrid, which is based on four principles: equality of opportunity; absence of discrimination; opportunities for participation; and respect for the dignity of everyone.

9. Employment with decent work is a means of improving living standards. Empowerment and inclusiveness are tools to achieve employment and decent work and are also a manifestation of empowerment itself. In the area of sustainable development, climate change requires significant changes in human behaviour in terms of production and consumption patterns, which can be achieved if people participate effectively in the formulation and implementation of plans, policies and programmes.

Recommendations

10. The Commission should:

(a) Agree on the definition of empowerment as a process with key components, each of which can be examined in detail;

(b) Begin a process of defining universally applicable empowerment indicators that can be used for monitoring progress of development priorities, including through an expert group meeting;

(c) Consider that measurement of empowerment, as a cross-cutting theme, should be built into all policies, including poverty eradication, social integration and employment and decent work;

(d) Consider the implications of empowerment for the consultations about and design of the post-2015 goals and objectives, which have within them the core of sustainable development, so as to ensure that people can better contribute to decision-making using existing means (such as non-governmental organizations) and new mechanisms (social media and information and communications technology outreach);

(e) Begin an examination of the relationship between access to information and communications technology and empowerment, including the role of mediation, investment and infrastructure;

(f) Review the lessons learned from the efforts of specific groups, such as young people, persons with disabilities, indigenous people and older persons, to ensure their empowerment in determining new empowerment concepts, paradigms and policies;

(g) Consider the role of empowerment at the international level, including in policy formulation and in ensuring accountability of international programmes, as well as the role of civil society organizations and information and communications technology;

(h) Encourage synthesis of existing research on empowerment with a view to identifying areas that require further investigation and the applicability to social and economic development policies and programmes.